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Three Years and Three Lessons since 9/11

By Jeffrey D. Sachs

On the third anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, I want to discuss three political lessons since that date. The first is about the Divided States of America. The Bush Administration response to 9/11 has profoundly divided the country, and has brought deep cultural divisions within the U.S. into much sharper focus. The second lesson is about American military might, and what it means for the world. The neoconservative quest for American empire has been exposed as completely hollow. The American military has a fantastic capacity to destroy but little capacity to enforce the U.S.'s political will on others. The third lesson is that the world will be made safer only by adopting a strategy based on solving the root causes of global instability: poverty and political conflict.

The Divided States

We knew from the deadlocked presidential election in 2000 that the United States is a divided country. It was only the Bush Administration response to 9/11 that showed us how divided the U.S. really is. Foreigners often adopt two incorrect interpretations of the U.S. The first holds that the country is united behind Bush's militaristic approach. Many foreigners believe that the American public is aggressive, unilateralist, and intent on international domination. The second interpretation holds that the Bush Administration has hijacked American politics, ruling much more radically than the American people themselves. This is the attitude of many people who despise President Bush but like the United States.

The truth is more complicated than either of these extremes. The United States is deeply divided. Around half of Americans utterly reject the Bush militaristic approach, but half of Americans accept it. Bush has not exactly hijacked American politics with his radicalism. Instead, he is representing a major strand of public opinion, though by no means a majority. For people like me, who completely oppose the President's policies, the strong support that these policies receive in much of the country is probably the most troubling lesson since 9/11.

When Bush began to campaign for the Iraq War in the middle of 2002, I was horrified at the lack of political opposition in the U.S. I believed, as did many abroad, that the Bush Administration's case about Iraq's purported Weapons of Mass Destruction was utterly flimsy and hyped. I felt sure that the WMDs were merely an excuse for war, not a real cause. I also supposed that American support for the war was generated by post-9/11 fear rather than ideology. The truth about American opinion has been more complicated, and much more unsettling.

In the past year, we have learned how the Administration manipulated the intelligence record; put pressures on the CIA; ignored warning signs of terrorist threats before 9-11; and was intent on toppling Saddam from the first day of the Administration. We have learned that just about everything claimed by the Bush Administration about Iraq's
WMDs was false. We have also witnessed a growing disaster in the American occupation of post-war Iraq. But we have also witnessed about half of the American public continuing to rally behind Bush and behind the Iraq War. This is the real news.

Opinion surveys and media accounts show that President Bush’s support comes most importantly from white evangelical Protestant supporters in the American South, Midwest, and Southwest. The core constituency of the Bush Administration is fundamentalist Christian, and the war is interpreted in the cultural and religious terms of these fundamentalists. This is the most frightening lesson about the U.S. in the past three years.

What do the American fundamentalists believe? From all accounts, a large percentage believe that events in the Middle East represent a struggle between good and evil in which Christian believers will triumph over non-Christians. Tens of millions believe in the so-called Rapture, in which the world will end in the great war at Armageddon, as in biblical prophecy. From these religious perspectives, small matters of evidence about WMDs simply don’t matter. They believe that Bush is fighting the Christian cause.

It is frightening that the Christian fundamentalists shape a considerable amount of U.S. public policy, and not only on the war but on other issues as well. In general, the fundamentalists are hostile to the biological and environmental sciences. An astounding 45 percent of Americans profess to believe in the literal biblical account of creation, with the world created just a few thousand years ago. Only 12 percent believe in Darwinian evolution, and the rest believe in some kind of evolution with divine guidance. When asked to choose between “creationism” and “evolution,” 57 percent of the American public chose creationism. The Bush supporters tend to oppose stem cell research and policies to fight climate change, on the basis of faith rather than science.

These are the deep divisions exposed since 9/11. For those of us strongly against the war and against the Bush Administration’s foreign policy, we often feel today that evidence simply doesn’t matter for half of the country, which supports policies on the basis of faith rather than reason.

The Imperial Fantasies
A second lesson since 9/11, not a surprise to many of us, is the complete failure of the theories of the neoconservatives in the Bush Administration. The Bush Administration should be understood as a coalition between the Christian fundamentalists and the neoconservative foreign policy advisors. The neocons believe, essentially, in translating the U.S.’s vast military power into political hegemony on a global scale. Since the U.S. is unchallengeable militarily, they reason, and can conquer countries at will, this power should be harnessed to political goals, such as remaking the Middle East in the U.S.’s interests, or stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons through pre-emptive wars. The Iraq War, from their point of view, was a demonstration project of American power.

The whole approach of the neoconservatives is a fantasy. They don’t understand the limits of military power in achieving political ends. Their model, they said, was the U.S. occupation of Germany and Japan after World War II, where a U.S. occupying authority converted those two countries into working democracies and U.S. allies. They planned to do the same in Iraq, after the U.S. troops were welcomed as liberators.

This whole approach would have been laughable if it wasn’t so deadly. The neocons failed to understand that in Germany and Japan, the U.S. occupation had legitimacy, since it followed immediately upon failed wars of aggression launched by Germany and Japan. In Iraq, by contrast, the U.S. occupation followed a war of aggression launched by the U.S., under false pretenses no less. There never was a moment of legitimacy for the U.S. occupation, and without that, there never was a moment’s chance for the U.S. to “reshape” Iraq in the U.S. image.

My views are not a matter of hindsight. I wrote exactly the same point before the war, as did countless other analysts. Here’s what I wrote two weeks before the war started, in The New Republic of March 2003.

«A conventional army on the ground cannot suppress local uprisings or guerrilla warfare without tremendous bloodshed and years of agony. For decades, the British could not suppress the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. The vast military might of Israel cannot suppress the Palestinian uprising. The Russians could not suppress the
mujahedin in Afghanistan in the 1980s or the Chechens in the 1990s. The United States took casualties and quickly departed from both Lebanon and Somalia and even now is struggling to gain control in Afghanistan outside of Kabul. Under much worse circumstances, the United States is about to insert itself for years into the vicious internecine struggles of Iraq, where tens of thousands of angry young men will be keen to pick off the occupying force. Our smart bombs won’t prove as helpful at ground level as they do at 35,000 feet.

Still less can a conventional army, even one backed by $380 billion per year in spending, suppress a swath of popular unrest across the Islamic world that stretches for nearly 10,000 miles. As our unilateralist actions make enemies where none existed before, we will find ourselves facing an intifada that extends far beyond Palestine and Al Qaeda. There are literally tens of thousands of soft U.S. targets to attack—hotels, factories, ports, ships, power grids—that cannot be protected adequately. The bombings in Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Aden, Mombasa, and Bali, by attackers impervious to U.S. military power, are just omens of what will come. And, as security concerns induce global investors to avoid Muslim regions, the resulting economic turmoil will exacerbate the unrest itself, just as the economic misery in the West Bank provides some of the tinder for the ongoing Palestinian intifada.»

The world does not need to fear a successful U.S. empire. It can’t be made. The U.S. represents a mere 5 percent of the world’s population, and around 20 percent of the world’s economy (measured at purchasing power adjusted national incomes). Nor is the world eager to be led by a U.S. empire. In the important words of writer Jonathan Schell, we now live in “the unconquerable world,” in which the demands for self determination can outlast even the most powerful army.

A Productive Response to 9/11
The third lesson that we’ve learned in the past three years is that there is a much better way forward for the world than unilateral military interventions. Global instabilities have several causes that need to be addressed at the core, and that cannot be solved solely by military approaches. The biggest problems include the large number of impoverished “failed states,” unable to provide prosperity or security for their citizens, and often the bases of operation for terrorists. The CIA State Failure Task Force, among others, has shown that state failures are usually rooted in the problems of poverty. Nevertheless the United States’ approach to these problems has been overwhelmingly military. A more balanced approach is required, where the United States does much more to tackle the roots of instability by significantly scaling up its foreign aid programs around the world.

The rich world as a whole has committed repeatedly to help the poor countries escape from the trap of extreme poverty. Most explicitly, the rich world has promised to help the poor countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to cut poverty, hunger, and disease sharply by the year 2015. Yet despite these promises, the help remains grossly insufficient. The United States, for example, gives just $15 billion per year in official development assistance, compared with $450 billion per year in military spending. This reckless imbalance between peaceful and military approaches to global instability is the main reason for failure of American foreign policy.

The year 2005 could be a pivotal year in getting to a more productive path for world peace. In particular, the United Kingdom and France have promised to make increased official development assistance the centerpiece of the G-8 Summit in Scotland in July 2005. If Europe speaks with a united voice, following through on the long-standing pledge to commit 0.7 percent of GNP in official development assistance, and calls upon the United States do the same, it might still be possible to rescue the U.S. from its disastrous militarized approach to global politics. Two months after the G-8 Summit, the world leaders are scheduled to come to the United Nations, to reconfirm their commitment to the Millennium Development Goals. On that occasion, it will be vital for the world to adopt a specific Plan of Action to ensure the success of the MDGs in all parts of the world, thus helping prioritize equally development and security.

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